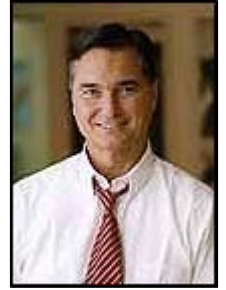


Accountability and Independence for Schools

Towards a Higher Standard

INDEPENDENT PERSPECTIVE

For a long time, independent schools have relied primarily upon peer-review accreditation for the purpose of accountability. Akin to the process used by colleges and universities, libraries and hospitals, school accreditation *via* a reputable accrediting organization is thorough, rigorous, and professional. It is rooted in two underlying principles: (1) offering full disclosure (what a school believes — its mission — and how it operates in congruence with those beliefs), and (2) meeting high standards (how schools should function and what students should learn). Schools that belong to the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), for example, undertake a periodic accreditation review that involves a year-long self-study and a several-day school visit by a team of professionals. The process is overseen by accrediting bodies in the various states and regions, all of which belong to the NAIS Commission on Accreditation, a national organization that sets universal criteria, models core standards, and periodically reviews the process of each of the accrediting bodies, in effect accrediting the accreditors.



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For as long as anyone can remember, this accreditation process was seen as "a higher standard" — that is, a standard that measures a broad array of important criteria for high-quality education — and, therefore, perfectly appropriate to assure the government and the public of the quality of independent institutions. In addition, independent schools have long argued that they are already highly accountable since, on a daily basis, they must please students and parents or risk losing them.

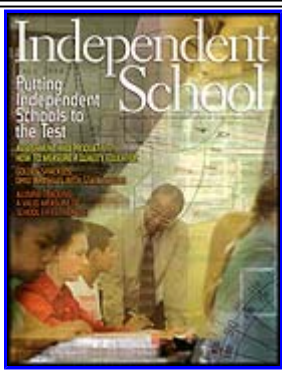
But as my wife is fond of saying, "That was then; this is now."

Over the last couple of years, accreditation at both the university and school levels has come under attack on the grounds of "cronyism" (a small and collegial group is called upon to conduct accreditation visits) and on the charge that the process largely measures inputs (library volumes, faculty credentials, computers per student) rather than outputs (evidence of student learning).

Additionally, outside the school sector, both the public and the government have been rattled and enraged by large scale misbehavior by those in trusted positions of responsibility, in both the corporate domain (scandals at Enron, Arthur Anderson, Tyco, and WorldCom) and the nonprofit world (startling missteps at the Red Cross, United Way, and The Nature Conservancy). Whenever public outrage is vented, government regulation inevitably follows, much like a parent's response to a misbehaving adolescent: "If you can't be trusted to behave and make good decisions, then I'm going to have to make and enforce a longer list of rules."

By virtue of their success, independent schools have largely had a "bye" from governmental scrutiny, much to their relief. Unfortunately, there are now a number of arenas for independent schools in which the public, governmental, and constituent expectations for accountability are growing — and for which some isolated abuses are provoking the government to show regulatory interest. An increasing number of critics of independent schools claim that independent schools enjoy freedom without public accountability, especially since the schools are not even required to meet the same standards of student testing and teacher certification of public schools. That colleges and universities in America are under siege by self-proclaimed public watchdogs and under scrutiny by Congressional committees (for everything from president compensation to diploma-selling to tuition rates) should also be sobering for the independent school world.

The pressure for measurable accountability is clearly increasing. I'd say, given the choice we still have in the independent school world, self-regulation is preferable to government regulation, since the latter almost always devolves into overregulation that becomes bureaucratically stifling, sometimes to the point of worsening the very services the regulation is meant to sustain. As our colleagues in the university world noted over a decade ago, what is at stake here in the threat of government intervention and regulation is the very diversity, independence, and excellence that make education in the private sector so successful (see *The Responsibilities of Independence: Appropriate Accountability through Self-Regulation*, NAICU Task Force Report, May 1994). To my independent school colleagues who resist more public accountability, I'd say, "Better for us to write the rules now than for the government to do so later."



Order "Putting Schools to the Test," the Fall 2004 issue of *Independent School* magazine.

The good news for independent schools? In the arena of school accountability for student learning, independent schools have a means and a metric by which to forestall regulation by adopting accountability measures of their own design *within the existing accreditation process*. These measures demonstrate accountability without compromising the very freedoms that make independent schools great.

The typical means by which the public, the media, and the government want to determine school accountability is high-stakes testing, since it's relatively easy and cheap to mandate, administer, and report out. Furthermore, the public, the media, and the government seem to believe testing is a proxy for learning and test scores a utilitarian means to measure and rank student and school success. There is good reason why independent schools resist such facile assumptions. Most independent schools believe otherwise: that standardized testing should be descriptive ("This is what the student still needs to learn") and diagnostic ("Here are the skills we need to work on") rather than punitive ("Sorry, you're a failure") or predictive ("You're good on standardized tests and that means a lot" or "You stink on standardized tests and won't have a future"). In fact, mostly what we get with an over-reliance on high-stakes testing is not student and school accountability but rather pedestrian teaching and dull curricula (because of preoccupation with teaching to the test), and bored or anxious students. At the public and media level, we get rankings of all kinds, based on the most spurious of criteria. And holding schools accountable for test scores, and that alone, is myopic if what we really want out of schools are students who pursue education past secondary school, who have habits of the heart and mind that make us proud, and who contribute to the workplace and community in powerful and positive ways.

What could independent school accountability in the domain of student learning look like? If or when a state starts making noises about requiring private schools to take the public school benchmark tests (which are invariably mismatched for independent schools in terms of timing and curriculum), one possibility is to negotiate "equivalency" testing. Independent schools in California have chosen to agree that, as a condition for membership and accreditation in the California Association of Independent Schools, all elementary schools administer the ERB tests in the fourth and eighth grades. This standardized test produces results that are useful at the student and school level, while, at the same time, provides results for the student and school normed against other schools by type (public, parochial, independent). In fact, it is possible to make arrangements for tests like the ERB to be cross-normed with state tests. (At the secondary school level, virtually all independent school students take some or all of the college entrance standardized tests such as SATs, Achievement Tests, and IB or AP exams, and part of the deal may be to lobby to substitute those tests for the state test results.) A preferable possibility for public accountability is modeled by independent schools in the Southwest and by independent schools in Canada: their accrediting organizations require their member schools to track graduates at the next level of schooling, since, after all, the real test of a school's success is its students' success after matriculating to secondary school or college (*see related articles in this issue*).

"Freedom with accountability" has been the rationale for the charter school movement. "Funding with accountability" is the rallying call for the voucher movement. "Freedom with a higher standard of accountability" should be the independent school mantra. We have it within our means to transform accreditation beyond the "auditing" function of confirming a school's success in achieving its mission and validating the self-study data it gathers for this periodic process. Accreditation in the future could, by a combination of new standards and objective measurements, fulfill a larger purpose than "quality assurance" for the school's own constituents and membership organizations: It could demonstrate in measurable terms that independent schools meet and exceed the general public's expectations for high quality education: i.e., schools that educate all the children within them so well that virtually every child succeeds.

Now is the time to determine collectively that independent schools will adopt either or both of these means (utilizing tests of our choosing and/or tracking of graduates). Independent schools and their associations should proactively and preemptively adopt these on their own before something less attractive is mandated to us by the state. Were we to do so, not only would we be assuring the public and the state that independent schools meet "a higher standard," but also we might just make a more convincing argument, by modeling our successes, that there is, indeed, a public purpose to private education.

Patrick F. Bassett is president of NAIS.

Key Findings from the Freshman Survey Trends Report

A partnership between the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) has enabled researchers to study the attitudes and aspirations of recent independent school graduates as they compare to their larger peer group. These findings offer insights into the ways independent schools help their students succeed. The Freshman Survey Trends Report notes, among other things, that:

- Independent school graduates are committed to achievement. They have high educational aspirations and work hard to achieve their goals.
- Independent school graduates are comfortable working closely with teachers and are more engaged in class than public school graduates.
- Independent school graduates pursue active and educational leisure-time activities.
- Independent school graduates are engaged in civic life. They are far more likely than public school graduates to vote in elections and volunteer in their communities.

For the full report, "Independent Schools: Preparing Students for Achievement in College and Beyond," [download](#) it as a PDF from the NAIS website.

Comments or questions about this article? Send a letter to the editor at ismag@nais.org.

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